

WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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HELENA STEPHENS OF WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION

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SUBJECTS: NATIONAL RAINBOW COALITION, WASHINGTON STATE RAINBOW COALITION, ROBERTO MAESTAS, LARRY GOSSETT, DEMOCRATIC PARTY, IMOGENE BOWEN, PAID STAFFERS, VOLUNTEERS, LEGACIES, PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATS, PERSEVERANCE

LOCATION: REMOTE INTERVIEW VIA ZOOM

DATE: MAY 16, 2024

INTERVIEW LENGTH: 00:23:43

FILE NAME: StephensHelena_WSRCOHP_20240516_Video.mp4

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SAUL 00:00:11

Okay, and what was the tension between the [Washington] State Rainbow Coalition and the National Rainbow Coalition from 1989 to the 90's? What inspired the rainbow to want to apply to be a State chapter, and how did these create difficulties within the organization?

HELENA 00:00:35

Okay, so that's a lot of big questions. Let's pull them apart.

Let's start first with what was the tension between the national and the state. And I think the tension between the national and the state was, as I had mentioned before, here in the state, we had two different factions that both wanted to kind of run the Rainbow Coalition. One was Roberto Maestas, who was the director of El Centro de la Raza at the time, and he had made certain promises to Jesse Jackson and felt that he could deliver on it if he was the head of the Rainbow Coalition. And then there was another faction that was really supporters of Larry

Gossett, and felt like we were the legitimate Rainbow Coalition, that we have been meeting around the state, and that people recognized us as the Rainbow Coalition. And so the interesting thing about that is that Larry and Roberto were very good friends, and even though there was this friction going on, I don't think it destroyed their friendship at all. I don't think it even dampened their friendship, because they understood that politics was one thing and personal friendships were was a different matter. So they were able to maturely separate the two, but for people who were following each of those individuals, it was difficult, and it was hard. And this national just did not like the bad press that we were generating because of the confusion, so like the Democratic Party was confused as to who to contact to have the Rainbow there, the Green Party was confused as to who to contact to have the Rainbow there, environmentalists and so... And since it gotten into the press, the national was like, "No, you need to clean this up." So that was the friction there.

And I want to keep that separate from your second question, which I think was what made the Rainbow decide to become a chapter of the national? I think is it boils down to legitimacy, right? You know, anybody can say, "I'm a chapter of the Rainbow Coalition." But unless you're recognized by the national you're just kind of out there in the wind. You have no protection, you have no guidelines, so national Rainbow would come out with position statements, position papers, policy pieces to follow. And of course, that information came down to our membership, and we could debate it and discuss it and see if we wanted to endorse it, but we understood that as part of a chapter of the national that we had a certain amount of allegiance to what the national had.

Now the challenge, of course, was the national expected so much money to be raised, and so much money at the local level to be given to the national. And you know, when you think about it, the Rainbow wasn't set up for the wealthy, it was set up for people who didn't have a voice in the process, who didn't have an opportunity to share their opinions and political views, right? And so what you were really doing was pulling money from poor people. And not to say that there wasn't ever any affluent people in the group, I'm not saying that, but it was an expectation that local chapters, or local state chapters, because there's, there's additional chapters within the state--so local state chapters were expected to raise money, fundraise for the national, and give the national so much money, and that was difficult. That's a challenge.

And then there was a third question.

SAUL 00:05:26

Yeah, how did--well, I think you answered it, actually, it was about the difficulties in the organizing. So this next question is, what impact did the president, Imogene Bowen, resigning in 1995 have on the organization or on yourself?

HELENA 00:05:46

Say the question again about Imogene?

SAUL 00:05:50

The resignation in 1995 and the impact it had on the organization or on yourself?

HELENA 00:05:59

Well, I'm trying to remember exactly why she resigned, but I do know that it was probably a conflict of some type with the state organization. What I remember is this: it was a big disappointment. Imogene was not only a leader in her own community, she came in representing Native Americans' voices, and as you know, not a lot of organizations have a Native American voice. Not that she's the only Native American out there, she's not, but she represented a significant constituency of Native Americans. And she had been working with the farm workers. And she was a solid leader. She was rational and gave good advice and good directions. And so I think

it was just an emotional blow when she resigned, because people looked up to her and wanted her advice and her wisdom on things.

And anytime, you know, one of the things about politics, regardless whether you're on the left or you're on the right, it's an emotional tug on your heart. It is things that you feel passionate about, so passionate that you get out of bed and you go to that protest, or you get out of bed and you go to that meeting, or you make signs, or you make calls, or you volunteer for some aspect, try to give money, if you're able to give money, you're invested in it. And so the thing about any time someone disagreed with how we were doing things in the Rainbow, and I think this is true of almost any organization, you become friends, you have friendships, you have relationships with these people. And then when you get into a disagreement about how things should be operated or run, or what kind of policy you should have, it actually kind of breaks your heart.

And so, I'm sorry I cannot remember what the exact conflict was about, and you're going to talk with Rick Harwood, and he remembers everything, so that'll be good, but it had a significant impact, because the other piece was with Imogene leaving, she was also taking a large group of Rainbow supporters with her. So there was a lot of people that was like, "If Imogene is not going to be here, I'm not going to be here either." And so we, I think, lost that stripe of the Rainbow, and so that was hard.

SAUL 00:09:13

Thank you. And when did you decide to leave the organization, and why?

HELENA 00:09:19

I never left. I never left the organization, the organization faded out, and so there was no organization for me to be a part of. But I never left the organization. As I said to you earlier, the Rainbow and the people in the Rainbow, I really felt were, for lack of better words, my tribe. We had all different nationalities and backgrounds and abilities, ages; and we all felt pretty passionate about making sure this country moved in a direction that included everyone. And not too many organizations out there include everybody, you know, and even the Democratic Party, for as much as they say that they're inclusive, you have to say you're a Democrat, you know, to really be in the party. And I understand why they do that, because they elect people to offices, and they don't want people flip flopping or, you know, one minute they're a Democrat, next minute they're a Republican, next minute they're independent, next minute they're a Green Party person. So I understand that, but the Rainbow wasn't like that. You could keep your own political affiliation as long as it wasn't right wing extremist. You were welcome at the table, you know. And so I never left the Rainbow.

But unfortunately, you have to have energy, you have to have resources, you have to have skill sets that can maintain an organization. And as people got older and started doing other things, even in that Rainbow work, like Larry Gossett becoming a King County Council member and other people running for office. You know, we were now infiltrating mainstream politics enough that a lot of Rainbow views and ideas were being carried on through that work. And the other thing that happened, I think for a lot of us was, you know, we got married, people met each other in the Rainbow, got married, had children, and the focus just changed a little bit, you know. The people couldn't give the energy that they used to give to the Rainbow. So no, never left the Rainbow, still part of the Rainbow, if you ask me, but now it's metaphorical, rather than actual meetings.

SAUL 00:12:27

Awesome. And you mentioned this a little bit, and I don't know if you want to expand or if you just want to leave it at that. Sorry. In your opinion, what led to the demise of the Rainbow Coalition, the Washington State Rainbow Coalition?

HELENA 00:12:46

I think I spoke to it already, really, which is just that it takes a great deal of energy and resources to maintain an organization, it really does, and if you have no paid staff--so this is one thing I would say: Volunteers does not cut it. You have to have paid staff to maintain an organization. I work with community groups all the time in my line of work now, in fact, I think a lot of the work that I do is actually Rainbow work, the Rainbow philosophy. And I tell these community groups all the time, as soon as you can get yourself established, grassroots community groups, you need to have paid staff. You need to have someone who's actually designated to do the basic things every day: get the agendas out, set the meetings, contact members, work with the leaders within the organization to make sure you have relevant topics going on, collect the dues, and maintain the paperwork, all those elements. People think that that just happens, it doesn't just happen. You have to have designated staff that's going to do that. So either you have to have a volunteer who's just really committed to doing that, but at any time, which you know, is that a volunteer might leave, or their life might get interrupted, or something else takes a priority. A paid staff knows that that's their job, and if you don't have that, then you subject the organization to actually falling apart.

SAUL 00:14:46

Awesome, and then what would you consider to be some of the organization's legacies?

HELENA 00:14:58

Yeah, I think we have lots of legacies. I think we have people, as I've mentioned before, who have gone on to elected offices and taken that Rainbow philosophy and applied it to current day policies and how they're administered. I think there was the camaraderie and the relationships built between people that have lasted over thirty years. So take example, the fact that recently, Cindy Domingo and Rick Harwood, Curt Firestone, Odette Polintan, David Della, myself, my husband Alex Stevens, and Rosalinda [Guillen] all have gotten together, you know, and we've stayed--oh, Bob Barnes--have all gotten together and stayed together. So the legacy is that the work still happens, only in different arenas now.

And what I like about it is that the work still happens in multiple arenas. So, you know, Bob created his own business, which was to provide facility and sound services to specifically people who are protesting against some of the US policies that we have. So he doesn't do it for just any group, he specifically targets his business to support people who are out there in the streets protesting. Larry Gossett applied Rainbow ideas and positions to the policy work he did at King County. We've had other people who have run for office, some of them didn't make it. My husband ran for school board, but he unfortunately didn't make it, but he still advocated on behalf of children of color in the school district. He still advocated for addressing discrimination in the Seattle School District. And I worked with environmentalists on human rights issues.

One of the legacies, I would say, is CCEJ, Community Coalition for Environmental Justice, which got started by Hazel Wolf. Hazel was the woman I was trying to remember, Hazel Wolf. John Caughlan was involved. Larry Gossett was involved. I was involved. Maria Batayola, I may not be saying her last name correctly, was core members of starting that work or doing that work. So there are lots of legacies of how we've impacted Washington state.

We've impacted the state legislature and who they elect. We've been able, still to this day, to identify people who have Rainbow philosophy running for office. So I think that there has been a really strong legacy about how we have impacted our communities, and that we're still doing that and still impacting all of the state of Washington. And that includes people who are living in Yakima, people who are living--I think about Lupita [Torres?], who's in Yakima and who holds significant positions of leadership. And Lupita and myself were on the Democratic National Convention floor in 1988 supporting Jesse Jackson when he ran for office, ran for

president. There are people in Spokane who are part of the Rainbow, who are still supporting Rainbow ideas. So I think our legacy is all over the state, our handprint is all over the state.

And one of the things that I will say that we did, that I think I'm very proud of, is that I think Washington state and either Virginia or West Virginia was the longest running Rainbow chapters, state chapters in the country. So we held on to it, really, for the longest period possibly we could, until the energy just kind of ran out.

SAUL 00:19:59

Awesome. Then last question is, what lessons did you learn in the Rainbow that can be valuable for today, organizers today?

HELENA 00:20:11

I learned to be persistent and to never consider one defeat as a final defeat. If you are faced with an action that doesn't go your way, then you need to sit down and think about, okay, it didn't work this way, what are other ways for me to do it? Do I need to bring more allies to the table? Who else is missing at the table that I need to talk to? You know, good ideas doesn't always rise to the surface the first time they're heard. Sometimes you've got to say--what's the thing that they say? You have to say something seven times before a person really hears it. So if you can imagine, you have an idea that may be new or different, but you know it's going to benefit the people. You cannot just offer it one time, and it fails and you give up. You have to offer it over and over again, and it may take years. So there are ideas that I'm sure I thought of in 1988 that I am still pushing forward to this day.

And one of the things about the Rainbow, the Rainbow was the beginning of any kind of DEIB [diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging] work we could ever think about. We didn't even have that term back then, right? But the thing about doing this type of work is you do get tired because there are so many forces that are against you for being successful. And even to this day, look at all the white supremacist groups we have out there, all the hate groups, all the conservative people that are not recognizing or providing our rights, or supporting our rights, and I think about even the Supreme Court, you know, they're not on our side most of the time. So what I would say is that you get tired when you do this work.

I do a lot of DEIB training now, and what I tell people all the time is, "You will get tired. You will get tired. That doesn't mean you give up. It means you just take a break and and you get some rest." And for some people that may be a day, for some people that may be three weeks, or some people six months, but you take a break, and then when you feel better, you get up and you start doing it again. And I think that's my philosophy, the things that I was doing back in 1988 and 1984, even 1980, I'm still doing to this day, because we haven't made it to the pinnacle yet, we just haven't. But I'm not giving up on it, and I'm not stopping. And I think the Rainbow really taught me not only to persevere, but to gather as many people around you as possible to help support you in the work that you're doing.

SAUL 00:23:32

Thank you so much for your response. That's our last question. So I'll go ahead and wrap this one up. I'm going to stop recording now.

HELENA 00:23:39

Okay.